

Department Store Murder

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Leon Adams clocked in a few minutes before 10:00 a.m. on a very mild and sunny Tuesday in April, as he was supposed to. It took only a few minutes to open the cash registers in the men's department. Leon was a suit salesman and he knew from experience that the first couple of hours on a weekday would be very slow. Slow to the point of boredom.

So, he was surprised when customers began to show up shortly after opening. The first to arrive was Ed Puckett, (Leon would introduce himself to all of the morning customers and learn their names). Leon greeted Ed as he entered the men's area. Ed looked around and picked out a few suits to try on in the fitting room. Ed had not been back there long when Leon's second customer, Louis Murphy, showed up at the cash register asking about a good deal on a sport coat and pair of slacks. Leon helped Louis in finding them and led him back to the fitting room. Meanwhile, Ed was still in the dressing room. Leon was pleased that he had two customers in his area so early -- it was only 10:20.

Leon spotted Gene Roberts browsing the edge of the men's area at 10:25, just after noticing that Ed had left the dressing room. What a busy day! It was difficult to keep track of so many customers.

Leon could see Ed wandering in the shoe department, so he moved on to his next sale, greeting Gene and escorting him to the dress shirt table, all the while Louis examined himself in the fitting room's full length mirror. He hoped Louis would like the sport coat and slacks he was trying on. Although he was some distance away from him, the garments appeared to be a good fit.

Justin Tanner came in at 10:30 and asked Leon where the men's sweaters were. Leon walked Justin over to the sweater table. Justin thanked him and said he wanted to pick one out to try on in the fitting room. As Justin was browsing the sweaters, Leon decided to check on Louis. As he walked back toward the fitting room, he saw Louis walk away from the mirror and return to his dressing room. It was only 10:36 and Leon was having an uncharacteristically busy weekday.

At 10:45, Leon saw Justin enter the fitting room with a green sweater and Leon noticed that Louis was still in his dressing room. At 10:50 George Whitley walked over to Leon from the shoe department and asked about a catalog order. Leon placed the order for him at the cash register, but it took a few minutes and he did not finish with it until after 11:00. George paid for the order, which was a pair of dress slacks, and left. At 11:04, Leon noticed Justin leaving the men's department. He had not purchased the sweater.

At 11:10, Leon knew that Louis had never left his dressing room and went to check on him. When he found him, he received the shock of his life. Louis was dead on the floor with a knife wound in his heart. Blood covered the carpeting of the small fitting room. Mercifully, there were now no customers in the men's department as Gene Roberts had left without trying anything on.

Leon held on to his composure long enough to return to the cashier station and call the store security officer, Ronald Clay. Leon's mouth was hot and dry as Ronald answered his phone, saying simply, "Clay speaking."

Leon stammered, "Ron, get over to the suit fitting room. A customer has been murdered."

Ronald was the retired detective Lieutenant Ronald Clay of the city police department. He came to work at the store after retiring from a 25-year career as a law enforcement officer. There wasn't much that went on in the store that escaped his attention. Leon was grateful he was on duty and available to handle this nightmare. Clay quickly found the shocked Leon still standing at the cash register. Firmly, but gently, Ronald had Leon lead him to the deceased customer. As soon as Clay saw him he knew who it was. He said, "I know this guy. He's Louis Murphy. I dealt with him and his friends quite a bit when I was on the Force. He's known as 'Louie the Lip' and is a career mobster."

Weakly, Leon asked, "So you think another crook got to him?"

"Yeah," Ron replied. "It's too much of a coincidence for it not to be mob related." Dryly, he added, "I've never seen a person murdered in a department store dressing room before, and I've seen a lot."

Within minutes, the store closed and a dozen police officers appeared on the scene. Clay knew that the key to solving the murder quickly rested with Leon, who always knew where men's department customers were at any given time. Ronald led him back to his office for a quiet visit. He wanted to speak with him before his former associates did. After determining Leon was recovered sufficiently from the shock, he asked him to relate all of the morning's activities he could remember.

Leon remembered everything and relayed the activities and movements of the five customers in detail. Clay listened intently. After considering what he had been told, they went to the video room and reviewed the security tapes. After watching it a couple of times, Ronald told Leon, "This is the murderer."

Solution:

Leon had suffered much in less than half a day. He asked, simply, "How do you know?"

Ron clay answered, "We know it was not Ed Puckett. You saw Louie alive after Ed left the dressing room and wandered into the shoe department. It wasn't George Whitley, either, because he came straight to you from the shoe department, placed his order at the cash register, and left. The same goes for Gene Roberts, as you said he never entered the fitting area." Pausing for a moment, he added, "The videotapes confirm everything you have told me."

Leon was keenly interested in Ron Clay's words. He asked, "So, you think it was Justin Tanner that killed Louie?"

"Yes, and not only because he was the only one who could have done it. I recognize him. He is also known as "Jersey Jim" Tanner and a sworn enemy of "Louie the Lip." No doubt he saw him back in the fitting area and seized the opportunity. Not a smart thing to do but those guys are not known for being bright."

Ron paused to let this soak in. With a thin smile, he added, "You know, I spent over 20 years trying to nail both of those guys. If they had known I was the security officer here, I would never have seen either of them again."